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Killing of Honduran Army officer linked to testimony in US

He tied Honduran intelligence and 'contras' to rights abuses

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Divisions in the Honduran Armed Forces have been deepened by the mysterious killing of an influential Honduran Army officer, say sources in Honduras as well as in the United States government and Congress.

These divisions could have negative consequences for US policy in Central America, the sources say. Honduras is the US's closest regional ally.

Both in Honduran civilian and military circles and among many US congressional analysts, there is widespread suspicion that the death of Maj. Ricardo Zuniga Morazan in Honduras in September is tied to information he gave Senate intelligence committees, congressmen, and ranking congressional staffers earlier this year and in 1984.

In his testimony, Major Zuniga alleged that Honduran intelligence agents and members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), a US-backed anti-Nicaraguan government rebel organization, had committed human-rights abuses.

Zuniga further alleged that at least lower-level US intelligence officials were aware that some Honduran intelligence agents and FDN recipients of US aid were engaged in human-rights abuses.

Whether or not Zuniga's allegations were true, they are widely believed in Honduran military and civilian circles and by Honduran analysts and US congressional sources. It is also widely believed that Zuniga's death was tied also to his opposition to the US-backed FDN rebels. According to the official Honduran version, he was murdered by an exiled Cuban businessman who owed him money.

Major Zuniga belonged to a group of young, reformist officers within the Honduran military. This group of officers has been alienated from US policy and the FDN by the substance of Zuniga's accusations and by his murder. These officers were the key military group responsible for the overthrow of Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez in March 1984, US congressional and Honduran civilian sources say. General Alvarez was the right-wing

chief of the armed forces, under whose aegis most of the Honduran human-rights abuses were allegedly committed.

When the reformist officers tried to dismantle those sections of the Honduran intelligence apparatus responsible for the abuses and jail the Hondurans and FDN members responsible, they were opposed by various officers of the US Central Intelligence Agency, say these same US and Honduran sources.

The reformist officers, who say the FDN was responsible for Zuniga's death, have further alienated themselves from the older officers in the Honduran Army who tend to follow the US lead and who favor the FDN's presence in Honduras, say these sources.

These events could, in the long run, cause serious difficulties for US policy in Honduras, according to several congressional analysts interviewed.

"The reformist officers who have been alienated by these events are the most dynamic and forward-looking guys in the Honduran Army. They are rapidly rising to the top. What has happened here will not, in the long run, serve US interests," a Democratic congressional staffer says.

The officers are, according to promotion procedures, slated to occupy some top positions in the Honduran Army by the end of next year. They want to steer a course more independent of US policy.

The Reagan administration has encouraged the use of Honduras as a base for FDN attacks on Nicaragua, and has enlarged US presence in Honduras by establishing military bases.

The reformist officers' nationalistic policies brought them into conflict with the FDN. The young officers alleged that the armed Nicaraguan exile group was creating a "state within a state" in Honduras and that it was guilty of serious human rights abuses against Hondurans.

Up to the time of his murder, Zuniga also pressed for limiting FDN and CIA presence and influence in Honduras.

Today serious divisions continue within the Honduran Army continue the presence of the FDN in Honduras and the limits that should be set on that presence.

Another major issue dividing liberal and conservative officers, according to

both US and Honduran sources close to the reformist group, is the fact that reformist officers continue to press for the punishment of military and intelligence personnel who are guilty of human-rights abuses. According to these sources, the more conservative officers, and much of the US intelligence establishment in Honduras, continue to oppose such a move.

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But, politically moderate sources close to the reformist officers say, the officers are still very agitated over Zúniga's death and by the underlying issues they believe it raises — those of US and Nicaraguan "contra" rebel presence in Honduras. The reformist officers believe that many in the US intelligence and military communities are still pressing for their removal.

All congressional sources interviewed agree that when Zúniga came to Washington in 1984 and 1985, he made the following charges before the House and Senate intelligence committees and in talks with congressmen and staff aides. Zúniga also made these points to this correspondent in an interview earlier this year:

- From about 1981 to 1984, while General Alvarez was still strongman, important groups of officers and their subordinates within Honduran intelligence agencies killed, tortured, and/or kidnapped several hundred Honduran and Salvadorean citizens in Honduras, Zúniga said. In this they were acting under orders of Alvarez. The Honduran special intelligence units involved, Zúniga said, had been organized with US help and were receiving some US financial assistance when the human-rights abuses occurred.

- Ranking officers and their subordinates of the FDN, were deeply involved in these activities, he said.

- According to Zúniga, some low-level CIA employees in Honduras knew that these recipients of US funds were engaged in illegal human-rights abuses and appar-

ently did nothing to stop them.

- When the reformist officers tried to jail some of the human-rights offenders, CIA officials intervened on behalf of these men.

Analysts close to US intelligence sources say that if US officials intervened, it was because they did not want the integrity of the Honduran intelligence establishment and the FDN to be threatened. Nor did they want to disrupt relations between the CIA and those organizations. Many US intelligence officials in Honduras worried that some reformist officers wished to come to a political arrangement with Nicaragua.

- At the same time, these reform-minded officers were harrassed by the FDN. In several cases, the officers received death threats from "people with the FDN," according to Zúniga.

- The CIA also intervened to stop the removal of top FDN officers who had been followers of former Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

In 1984, Edén Pastora Gómez, an anti-Sandinista leader who commanded rebel forces in Costa Rica, came to Honduras to examine the possibility of forming a united front with the FDN. He indicated his willingness to join but said that before he did so, several pro-Somoza members would have to be purged from the FDN. His list included FDN members who were allegedly deeply involved in the Honduran rights abuses. US intelligence officials present at the meeting opposed purging the men on the list, said Zúniga. Consequently, the unity talks fell apart.

Zúniga's report of this meeting was confirmed by Nicaraguan exile leaders close to Mr. Pastora and by ranking US Republican congressional staffers.

- Finally, Zúniga said Washington's attitude provoked resentment within the officer corps — especially the reformist officers. These officers felt the Reagan administration was placing FDN interests above Honduran national interests.